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Writer's block and a cognitive process model of composing: recent research and implications for teaching

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by

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

In "Confessions of a Textbook Writer," David Tedlock describes a personal experience with writer's block:

> I slept at least five hours and wrote but two of the five others I had left, slept desperately on the bed, the couch, the floor, slept and then got up to drink more cups of coffee and write another paragraph or sit and stare at the bare desk top and blank page . . . . Today I went into work wondering about it, thinking I haven't slept like that since writing my thesis--my first, and last, novel. I wondered if I was coming down with the flu and decided I definitely had had a fever yesterday (167).

Tedlock offers a humorous account of what can happen when a writer can't write. Obviously, he was later able to overcome his block. Almost any writer can identify with the scene Tedlock describes, but for many, experiencing writer's block may seem neither humorous nor easy to overcome.

Writer's block is a mysterious composing problem. One day a writer may be able to write fluently, yet the next he or she may sit listlessly staring at a page which begs to be filled. And sometimes writer's block may not even be a "problem" at all--writers can block simply because they're at a critical point in the writing task and they need more time to think. Donald Murray believes

this type of block may be essential, calling it "the normal, necessary, always terrifying delay that precedes effective writing" ("The Essential Delay" 219). However, sometimes a writer may have spent considerable time on a writing project (maybe as much as can be afforded) and still not be able to write. Or the writer may have completed part of the task and not have been able to finish. This same writer may not have suffered serious writing blocks in the past.

The purpose of this thesis is to explain some of the reasons why a writer may block. Although many aspects of the composing process have been meticulously researched, relatively little work has been devoted to writer's block (Rose, Writer's Block). Of the research concerning writer's block that has been done, most has been "scattered and preliminary" (Boice, "Cognitive Components" 91).

Nevertheless, based on the research that has been accomplished, it is possible to explain what may influence writer's block. Literature concerning writer's block shows that it can be partially understood when examined according to a cognitive model of composing, because of blocked writers' behavior when they compose. For instance, blocked writers often try to write using inappropriate plans and strategies and/or absolute rules

for writing. Research conducted on topics such as writing apprehension and discourse communities will provide input as well.

Chapter Two, "Writer's Block Defined," outlines what is meant by the term and discusses how writer's block may be manifested. For example, writers may be blocked even if they've already begun a writing project but are unable to continue.

Chapter Three, "A Cognitive Process Model of Composing," explains how fluent writers compose. By examining a general model of the composing process, it is then possible to infer what happens when blocked writers attempt to compose, and note similarities and differences between the two groups. Included in this chapter will be a discussion of the writer's task environment, long-term memory, and an explanation of the actual writing processes and subprocesses. Expert and novice writers will also be discussed because novice writers and blocked writers seem to share some of the same characteristics, such as poor planning strategies.

Chapter Four concerns "Cognitive Explanations of Writer's Block." There I attempt to explain how blocked writers differ in composing methods from fluent writers, according to the cognitive composing model outlined in Chapter Three. Specifically, I discuss blocked writers'

rules for writing, their plans and strategies, their tendency to edit prematurely, and the nature of their self-evaluations.

Chapter Five covers "Other Influences on Writer's Block," and includes a discussion of writing apprehension, a writer's personality, and discourse communities. Blocked writers may also be anxious about writing, and this anxiety may influence their ability to compose. Although some of the conclusions are speculative, a writer's personality may also relate to why he or she becomes blocked. Discourse communities define the social context of the writing task. If writers are being asked to write for a discourse community of which they're not a member, they may find it hard to write successfully, or perhaps even to write at all.

Chapter Six, "General Conclusions and Implications for Teaching," briefly discusses what is and can be done to help writers overcome blocks and outlines areas of writer's block that still need to be investigated. To my knowledge no clear consensus exists on the best way to "cure" writer's block; nevertheless, general conclusions can be drawn, and the topic remains ripe for more investigation.

All research incorporated in this thesis relates to the study of writing, but it is drawn from several different areas within the field. For example, John Daly, Cynthia Selfe and others focus on writing apprehension as distinct from writer's block. I feel that writing apprehension may very well be related to blocking, because a blocked writer is also likely to be anxious. Similarly, Mike Rose has studied writer's block extensively from a cognitive viewpoint, yet he admits that cognition alone doesn't account for all the reasons a writer may block, such as affective or social ones. What I've tried to accomplish within the limited scope of this project is to examine research from several distinct, yet related, areas of composition and apply that research to writer's block. The reader should keep in mind that what follows is not comprehensive, but is instead a general overview.

One final note: As Rose says, "writer's block is one messy problem or, more likely, a web of problems" ("Complexity" 227-228). It's tempting when studying any composing problem to isolate possible manifestations and then overgeneralize about how those manifestations might "cause" that problem. To do so, however, may misrepresent the nature and complexity of composing difficulties. In this thesis, I discuss specific aspects

of writer's block in detail, such as the tendency of blocked writers to adhere to rules absolutely, but I do not mean to imply that all blocked writers behave in the same manner, nor that all blocked writers are influenced by the same things. To fully understand how and why a writer blocks, one must ultimately consider the complex nature of writer's block and all possible reasons for blocking.

CHAPTER II. WRITER'S BLOCK DEFINED

Most writers have been blocked at one time or another while trying to write. Sometimes this block may have involved delaying the start of a much-desired, or even required, writing project. Or the writer may have begun the writing task, only to be unable to continue writing, let alone finish. Whatever form the block takes, it remains especially troubling for the writer, not to mention others interested in the writer's progress (such as teachers and editors) and eventual product.

Blocking may show up in different ways. For instance, the blocked writer may produce a number of sentences, but the sentences may not signal progress; instead, they may be false starts or just repetitions of what's been written before. Or the writer may stop in the middle of a writing project and be unable to resume. It's also possible that the writer may not progress even to the middle of a writing project (Rose, Writer's Block).

No firm consensus exists as to what writer's block is cognitively or what its signs are. Murray describes writer's block as "real" and says that when a writer is blocked, "Anxiety becomes paralysis" (A Writer Teaches Writing 44). Linda Flower believes writer's block is a "strategy problem" that doesn't have to do with a

writer's ability or knowledge (Problem-Solving). Robert Boice says that writing blocks are signaled by "complaints of an inability to write and evidence of consequent interference with general functioning" ("Experimental" 184). Rose describes blocking as that "frustrating self-defeating inability to generate the next line, the right phrase, the sentence that will release the flow of words once again" ("Rigid Rules" 389).

Writer's block, as most researchers see it, is not due to lack of writing skills, as when, say, a basic writer is unable to compose. Rose also stresses that "blocking presupposes some degree of alertness and of effort" (Writer's Block 3). In other words, a blocked writer isn't blocked simply because he or she is bored or lazy.

Although writer's block can strike any writer, some may be especially prone to suffer from it. Flower says that those who frequently have trouble getting started may be relying on time-honored but unproductive rituals for composing--such as waiting for inspiration before beginning to write (Problem-Solving). Others, students in particular, may be blocked because of instruction (through teachers and texts) based on a traditional,

linear model of composing, which may emphasize and encourage following rules (Oliver).

Teachers may have had a justifiable rationale for encouraging "rule-following" because they thought that good writers simply applied what they learned. As Lil Brannon noted in 1985, "Until recently the field [of composition] had tacitly assumed that the process of composing was simply the conscious application of the rules and procedures that people learned in school" (9). Many of these rules and procedures stemmed from a focus on and an analysis of the written product, particularly that of experienced and/or professional writers. Composition instructors would then apply in the classroom what was learned from the product analysis--such as asking students to "construct thesis statements and outlines as the beginning points of composing so that a paper could become focused and organized" (Brannon 9). Traditionally, teachers tried to intervene in the writing act by motivating students to write well, then analyzing the written text to decide whether or not their intervention was successful. The process of writing--how students actually produced the written text--was generally ignored (Bracewell).

It's easy to understand why earlier research focused mainly on the written product. Writing may seem

mysterious because it is a private act, sometimes done in isolation, whether physical or behavioral. Writers often have idiosyncratic habits which further isolate their writing process. In addition, the act of writing is complex, because so much of the process occurs in the writer's head (Bracewell). For these reasons, studying the written product alone didn't give researchers or teachers much indication of what causes writer's block, or help explain why some writers are more proficient than others.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, researchers noticed a difference between what was being prescribed for composing and what writers actually do during the composing act. As Flower and John Hayes stressed in 1977:

> Within the classroom, 'writing' appears to be a set of rules and models for the correct arrangement of preexistent ideas. In contrast, outside of school, in private lives and professions, writing is a highly goal-oriented, intellectual performance ("Problem-Solving" 269).

Flower, Hayes and others sought to explain this difference by turning to research in cognitive science, a field which incorporates research from psychology,

artificial intelligence, linguistics, anthropology, philosophy and neuroscience (Lunsford).

Another reason researchers have turned to cognition to study writing has to do with the changes in the students now appearing in the composition classroom. Writing teachers used to consider students' difficulties to be related to problems of expression. Composition teachers assumed that students came to the classroom with ideas that only needed to be spoken and/or written. The students who appeared to have the "better" ideas were assumed to be brighter or more mature than the less successful ones. However, Patricia Bizzell believes that during the last 20 years, so many students have come to the classroom with "ill-considered" ideas, according to academic standards, "that we can no longer see the problem as primarily one of expression" (214). These students have forced writing teachers and researchers to study the thinking processes involved in writing.

Examining the cognitive processes that operate during composing makes it possible to discover reasons why a writer might become blocked and how the blocked writer differs from the fluent writer when both try to compose. For example, a blocked writer may adhere to rigid rules, try to use poor planning strategies, and/or edit the text too soon. Of course, a writer can also be

influenced by the environment of the writing task, his or her personality, and his or her attitude towards writing. Therefore, because a blocked writer uses the same cognitive composing processes as a nonblocked writer (with less success), the foundation for an understanding of writer's block may come from an examination of how a fluent writer composes.

CHAPTER III. A COGNITIVE PROCESS MODEL

Cognitive researchers have developed a theory of the composing process that is based in part on their analysis of think-aloud protocols, conducted as writers actually compose. Probably the best-known and most widely cited description of this process is the cognitive model put forth by Flower and Hayes. Their model outlines three general processes that occur during composing: planning, translating, and reviewing, as well as a number of subprocesses (Hayes and Flower, "Identifying"). What follows is an overview of a cognitive process model of composing, one which relies heavily on the research and terminology of Flower and Hayes. Also included is a discussion of expert and novice writers, in which I outline how each group composes and compare the composing strategies of each to blocked and nonblocked writers.

Flower and Hayes' model of the writing process attempts to identify the processes and subprocesses of composing, yet still account for individual differences in composing styles ("Identifying"). In formulating such a model, they recognize that all processes and subprocesses work together, not separately, while a writer composes--but they also attempt to "recognize those places where individual subprocesses make distinct

contributions to the whole . . . ." (Flower et al. 51). Flower and Hayes designed their model of composing according to a hierarchical structure.

The model is based on four major points:

1. The process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing.

2. These processes have a hierarchical, highly embedded organization . . . .

3. The act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer's own growing network of goals.

4. Writers create their own goals in two key ways, by generating both high level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writer's developing sense of purpose, and then, at times, by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing ("A Cognitive Process Theory" 366).

That the model contains "distinctive processes" does not mean that the processes are separate, but rather that they are used by writers over and over while writing. Nor do all writers compose alike, relying on the same processes in the same order. Sondra Perl explains that because it is recursive, "writing implies that there is a forward-moving action that exists by virtue of a backward-moving action" (364). Furthermore, "the parts

that recur seem to vary from writer to writer and from topic to topic" (364). While composing, the writer adapts to a number of constraints, conventional and otherwise, and he or she works at making meaning (Coe and Gutierrez).

Three important elements of the writer's world provide the context for this model of composing: the task environment (I've included a discussion of how writers function as problem-solvers and deal with the rhetorical problem), the writer's long-term memory, and the writing process (Flower and Hayes, "Identifying;" "A Cognitive Process Theory").

Task environment

The task environment includes "everything outside the writer's skin that influences the performance of the task" (Hayes and Flower, "Identifying" 12). This environment is made up of the writing assignment, and, as the writer composes, of the evolving text itself. As the writer proceeds, the text produced becomes an increasingly important aspect of the task environment (Hayes and Flower, "Writing"). The rhetorical problem as the writer defines it also influences the writing being produced. How well a writer understands the task

environment, such as defining the rhetorical problem, will affect whether or not the writer will block.

The writer as problem-solver Flower and Hayes believe composing is a problem-solving activity. Problem-solving, as Flower and Hayes see it, "explores the wide array of mental procedures people use to process information in order to achieve their goals" (Problem-Solving" 270). Successful writers may rely on many intellectual skills, including heuristics--systematic procedures that function as "alternatives to trial and error" (Flower and Hayes, "Problem Solving" 270). These heuristics do not function as rules the writer adheres to, but rather as alternative choices the writer may make while composing. For example, one heuristic writers may use to generate ideas is to brainstorm, writing down whatever comes to mind. Fluent writers use heuristics in a flexible manner, relying on them as needed. Blocked writers, however, don't use heuristics nearly as much. Instead, they will often substitute a more restrictive rule for writing, such as "My first sentence must be perfect before I can continue writing" (Rose, Writer's Block).

The rhetorical problem The problem-solving process that occurs during composing is not a creative accident. The writer must solve the rhetorical problem inherent in the writing task. Sometimes the rhetorical problem is specified in the writing assignment, which may outline the topic, audience, and, at least implicitly, the writer's role. In other situations the writer may have to define and understand the rhetorical problem given relatively little information (Bracewell). The rhetorical problem, as the writer defines it, also includes his or her goals for writing, such as "I want to convince the reader to accept my proposal" (Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory"). Whether or not writers are able to compose fluently depends in part on how well they understand the rhetorical problem. If writers don't understand what the writing task requires, then they may block.

A writer's misconceptions about composing, such as a belief that writers only compose when inspired, can make defining and solving the rhetorical problem difficult. Flower and Hayes admit that "inspiration" does occur when writing but they also think some writers may depend on it too much. Flower and Hayes, however, believe that inspiration almost always occurs after a writer has already been thinking about the composing task ("Problem-

Solving"). In other words, what a writer may perceive as successful inspiration is more likely to be a "coming together" of a solution to a problem that the writer has been working on for some time (perhaps unconsciously).

They also suggest that sometimes what a writer perceives as inspiration might more accurately be known as a release from time pressure ("Images"). D.N. Perkins notes that what may make the moment of insight or inspiration seem so powerful is the satisfaction the person receives from resolving a problem, in the writer's case, the rhetorical problem. While cognitive researchers do not advocate waiting for inspiration before starting to compose, they do acknowledge that sometimes writers may feel inspired while writing.

A writer who relies only on inspiration to compose may not be aware of the complex processes that operate during composing. According to Flower and Hayes, such misconceptions may obscure the fact that

> A writer in the act of discovery is hard at work searching memory, forming concepts, and finding a new structure of ideas, while at the same time trying to juggle all the constraints imposed by his or her purpose, audience, and language itself ("The Cognition of Discovery" 21).

Flower and Hayes, however, recognize, that the way a writer writes and the writing produced always retain some degree of unpredictablity. Writers do not necessarily process information or define a rhetorical problem in the same way. For example, some writers may reflect a great deal before writing, while others may jump right in (Rose, Writer's Block). Obviously, writers can compose in ways which inhibit fluency. For instance, writers can pause so much while trying to compose (perhaps while searching for the perfect opening sentence) they they lose their train of thought, and block.

According to Flower and Hayes, the key to solving the rhetorical problem is the ability to formulate critical questions, because "people only solve the problems they give themselves to solve" ("The Cognition of Discovery" 22). This act is sometimes referred to as problem-finding or problem formulation. Perkins identifies this as an important part of creating, and one which evolves as the creative product (in this case writing) evolves.

The writer starts with a general idea of the rhetorical problem, but ends with a particular product, the text. While composing, the writer refines the rhetorical problem, which is limited by the emerging constraints of the task. The evolving text limits the

possibilities of the text to come. The term "problem-finding" may be misleading, though, because writers don't "find" a problem, they build one, and the creative process doesn't always split neatly into "finding" a problem and then "solving" it (Flower and Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery;" Perkins). Instead of finding a problem, writers, even when given an assignment, create their own inner representation of the rhetorical problem during composing. That is, writers decide specifically what information to include and how they want to influence the audience, among other things. If writers don't understand what is expected and/or what the writing task calls for, they may block because they won't be able to make such decisions, or make appropriate ones.

Flower and Hayes divide the rhetorical problem into two key elements: 1) the rhetorical situation, and 2) the writer's own goals ("The Cognition of Discovery"). Included under the rhetorical situation are the audience and the writing assignment; included under the writer's goals are affecting the reader, creating a persona or voice, building a meaning, and producing a formal text.

Flower and Hayes recognize that their research, because it is based on protocol analysis, is limited to those aspects of composing that the writer can verbalize, and that there may be a large amount of information that

the writer can't articulate. They believe that this information may reside in "stored problem representations." These representations can include standard definitions of what's required by a writing situation, such as information about audience and purpose. The stored problem representation might also include information about possible solutions to the rhetorical problem, such as what tone the writer should adopt or possible words or phrases to be used (Flower and Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery"). The writer can then use the stored problem representations when writing, or build a unique representation if needed (or some combination of both). It could be that a fluent writer is more adept at utilizing stored problem representations and creating new ones, while a blocked writer may try to use the same problem representation for all writing tasks, whether or not it is appropriate. Part of what characterizes fluent writers is their knowledge of alternative solutions to problems in writing and their flexibility in making those choices.

Long-term memory

A person has access to three kinds of memory: a sensory buffer, long-term memory, and short-term or working memory. The sensory buffer, according to Norman

Frederiksen, "registers and maintains very briefly a stimulus event, providing time for it to be recognized, classified, stored in working memory or ignored" (364). Working memory contains information that the writer is actually using, and has a limited capacity.

Stored problem representations reside in the writer's long-term memory, which includes information stored in the writer's mind and information available from outside resources (Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory"). Flower and Hayes believe that long-term memory has its own structure for organizing information and that the writer retrieves the appropriate information and then finds ways to use it that are compatible with the rhetorical problem. The material will be retrieved and used according to the appropriate subprocess, whether it be a flexible writing plan or an absolute rule the writer adheres to.

The capacity of long-term memory is huge, and information can be stored in long-term memory for a lifetime (Hayes). Such memories may include information about previous experiences (what a past teacher's face looked like, for example) or knowledge about everyday occurrences, such as how to drive from one city to another. Long-term memory stores information in the form of nodes. Frederiksen says that each node "represents

an item of information, or a cluster or chunk of related items; if some of the elements of such a cluster are activated, all are likely to be activated" (364). These nodes may be connected in conceptual networks, with links between nodes being established on the basis of associations between concepts. Through these networks the writer can derive information that was not explicitly stored (Frederiksen).

Little research has been conducted which explains the relationship of long-term memory and blocking. It is possible, however, to speculate about this relationship. Flower and Hayes say that information is retrieved from long-term memory after a key term or feature (what they call a "pointer") has been activated in short-term memory ("Images"). For example, a writer receives an assignment which asks him or her to discuss whether or not university police should be allowed to carry firearms. The writer might associate this assignment with the key term "argument" in short-term memory, which would then access related information about argument in long-term memory. It is possible that the information retrieved would be detailed and appropriate, such as information about what tone to adopt, possible counterarguments, and information about argumentative writing from previous composition courses. Or the writer might retrieve only limited and

inappropriate information, such as a memory of a past shouting match with his or her parents about what clothes to wear. If the writer can't retrieve information (perhaps lacking an appropriate key term), or retrieves inadequate or inappropriate information, the writer could block.

Writing process

Each aspect of the cognitive model shows that writers are faced with a number of choices to make when they compose. Components of the writing process are grouped by function, but that doesn't mean the writer always approaches writing by using exactly the same strategies in precisely the same order. Instead, the writing process is adaptable to the task at hand; as Flower and Hayes note, "writing moves in a series of non-linear jumps from one problem and procedure to another ("Problem-Solving" 281). Writing is a complex, multi-layered process composed of subprocesses in which the writer plans, translates, and reviews the emerging text. The writer also, consciously or unconsciously, monitors what happens as he or she composes.

Planning Planning is one of the three major components of the composing act, and one of the most

powerful. The planning process gathers information from the writer's task environment and long-term memory. This information is then used to develop goals which guide the composing act as the text develops (Hayes and Flower, "Writing"). These goals result in the writer's plan to write. This plan often is not fully developed, however. Instead, the plan is frequently a "vague, quite incomplete, and diverse map to guide a complex exploration that the writer intends to carry out" (Flower and Hayes, "Images" 124).

The planning process includes the subprocesses of generating, organizing, and goal-setting (Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory;" "Identifying"). Crucial to the generating act is what's available in long-term memory. If this information closely matches the rhetorical problem at hand, the writer may generate polished and fully-developed prose. Sometimes, however, the writer may be able only to generate incomplete thoughts, which will eventually need further development (Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory"). Writers may be able to produce only fragmentary information because they simply don't know enough about their topic and/or they aren't able to access related chunks of information from long-term memory. It is also possible that the growing constraints of the task will

overtax their short-term memory and they will block (Rose, Writer's Block). At this point, the writer's ability to develop the text will be influenced in part by the writer's experience and the strategies he or she uses. For example, a writer could become blocked if he or she doesn't have a plan for proceeding, such as to write first and edit later. The writer could also block if he or she uses an inappropriate plan, such as "never use an outline because writing should just flow spontaneously."

After and sometimes during the generating process, the writer organizes the material which has been retrieved from the long-term memory. The information is categorized, which sometimes helps the writer generate more information about the topic (or see where more information is needed). During the organizing process the writer also decides how a text will be arranged (Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory"). That is, the writer decides where to place information within the text and what the finished text will look like.

How the writer organizes the text is influenced by the goals established in the third subprocess of planning: goal-setting. Flower and Hayes believe that writers use procedural goals, such as "I want to begin with this anecdote," and substantive goals, such as "I

need to relate writing apprehension to writer's block to show how anxiety can influence blocking." Sometimes writers work with both types of goals at the same time ("A Cognitive Process Theory"). And, just as the writer defines the rhetorical problem, he or she also creates the goals which guide the writing plan. Some goals may reside intact in the writer's long-term memory, but others are created and implemented using the same processes that work thoughout the composing act. How proficient writers are at setting workable goals affects their fluency--writers can become so tied up in trying to create goals or in working with inappropriate ones that they can't compose.

Perkins, in his study of the creative process, has discovered that most creators are guided by a sense of purpose. This purpose (or a sense of one's goals) is what enables the creator/writer to use ordinary mental processes to produce the creative product, in the writer's case, the written text. David Galbraith identifies three types of goals peculiar to writing: expression, coherence, and social functions. Expression involves putting the writer's ideas into words. Coherence is achieved when the writing shows interrelationships among ideas and their relative importance. The writing must also conform to the desired

social function, whether it be to persuade, illuminate, or entertain (Galbraith). All goals, whether large or small, are perceived and formulated by the writer (Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory"). Again, if the writer has neither a clear understanding of his or her goals for writing, nor of the strategies for developing such goals, then the writer may block.

The entire planning process helps the writer start and carry through the act of making meaning while composing. This meaning can take many forms: internal, external, verbal, or imagistic. Working with these various forms of meaning is in part what makes writing difficult, especially for some; Flower and Hayes believe that "Much of the work of writing is the creation and translation of these alternative mental representations of meaning" ("Images" 122). At each stage, the writer forms the current meaning, which may be quite different from the meaning present in the finished text. Juggling the emerging constraints of the task and forming text at the same time requires the writer to be flexible. Blocked writers are sometimes characterized by a lack of flexibility, and they may try to compose with the same static plans and representation of the text that they started with (Rose, Writer's Block).

A concept similar to Flower and Hayes' representation of meaning is that which Stephen Witte calls pre-text, "the mental construction of 'text' prior to transcription . . ." (397). Pre-text is a mental linguistic representation of the writer's intended text and may be a possible outcome of planning and/or serve as a foundation for later planning. According to Witte, pre-texts function as "critical points along a continuum of composing activities between planning and transcribing written text," and he says that the concept of pre-text is implicit in the work of Flower and Hayes (397).

Witte, who also bases his research on the results of protocol studies, makes four observations about mental pre-text: 1) pre-text may influence written/rewritten text immediately and directly; 2) pre-text may be stored in memory so that its effect on the written text will be direct, but delayed; 3) pre-text may be evaluated according to the same criteria used to evaluate and revise written text; and 4) pre-text may function as a critical link between the written text, the translation of ideas, and the transcription of those ideas. It is possible that fluent writers are more adept than blocked ones at manipulating their pre-texts to solve composing problems before they try to translate their ideas into written prose, and thus avoid blocking. For example, a

fluent writer might use pre-text to try out ideas before committing them to paper, and/or mentally test a rule's appropriateness.

Witte acknowledges that different writers will use pre-text differently, and he warns against a "Procrustean process of fitting the activities of composing into discrete cubbyholes, however necessary such categorization may seem to be for theoretical and descriptive purposes or for pedagogical purposes" (416). When a teacher artificially separates or misrepresents the composing process, such as by saying that all writers rely heavily on pretext, or that all writers plan first, then write, the students may be misled. If a writer does not understand that all of the processes work together and that all writers use the processes in individual ways, then that writer could experience conflict while composing and could block.

Translating Guided by the goals established during planning, the translating process can also be powerful and make many demands of the writer. As the writer translates, he or she turns the material previously generated (linguistic and nonlinguistic) into written prose. This translation is usually accomplished in the form of complete sentences (Hayes and Flower,

"Writing"). If the writer, however, has had difficulty with a previous process, such as defining the audience's needs according to the rhetorical problem, then the writer may be unable to translate. The writer may also become blocked during the translating process itself, as he or she searches for the perfect phrase, for example, or immediately edits each sentence to conform to a preexisting standard.

The translating process may place a large burden on short-term memory, particularly for inexperienced writers. Or global constraints of the task may be ignored because of local concerns, or the writer may to choose to ignore some of the guidelines for standard written English. The degree to which the emerging text itself influences the writer while he or she composes can vary greatly (Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory"). It may be that writers who seldom block are simply skilled at dealing with the text on a global level, and thus can avoid getting slowed down by local demands early in the translating process.

Reviewing As writers translate information into prose they must review what has been written, in order to see how the emerging text compares with their goals for writing. Writer's instigate the reviewing process by

either a planned conscious decision or a spontaneous choice as a result of the planning and/or translating process. The subprocesses of reviewing, evaluation and strategy selection (called in earlier models evaluating and revising), may interrupt the writing process at any time--and can restart it all over again (Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory;" Flower et al.). A writer can get so caught up in the reviewing process (evaluating each sentence, for example) that he or she is unable to continue generating and translating text. A fluent writer must achieve distance from the task in order to build an accurate image of the existing text.

As writers build a working image of the text they must make several important decisions, regarding goals, procedures to use, and kinds of changes needed (Flower et al.). Important to how successful the revision will be are the writer's knowledge (about the strengths/weaknesses of the text, strategies to use, etc.) and the writer's intentions (such as goals/criteria and image of the task).

The revision process starts with the task definition, the writer's image of what the revision will involve (for example, whether to work with global or local concerns). The writer then begins evaluation. Some evaluation occurs naturally while reading, whether

the writer is making a conscious effort to evaluate or not. However, when the writer/reader has chosen specifically to evaluate, he or she enlarges the constraints placed on the task. The evaluation process is based on an important principle: it is viewed as a "progressive enlargement of the goals and constraints one entertains" (Flower et al. 25). This leaves the evaluation open to possibilities for both success and failure; it can become automatic to some degree, and it operates at all levels of the writing process, in a sense before writing has even begun. Defining problems during evaluation requires the writer to mentally construct a text through reading (or memory) and at the same time represent her intentions (Flower et al.). This can be difficult for writers to accomplish. Blocked writers may be so caught up in surface concerns that they aren't able to consider global concerns at the same time.

The output of evaluation, problem representation, includes the entire range of problems the writer represents to himself or herself, whether these problems are vague or specific. Out of this determination of the problem(s) arises the need for strategy selection, in other words, the writer decides which action to incorporate as a part of revision. This strategy might include rewriting (generating new text on the basis of

existing text), revision (choosing actions to deal with recognized problems), delaying action on a problem, or ignoring it altogether (Flower et al.). Difficulty with any one of these processes can prevent the writer from successful revision. If writers do not know of any alternative strategies for revision, they may block. For example, a writer might realize there are problems in the present text, yet not know how to fix them. At this point, the writer blocks.

The monitor

The constraints imposed by writing and the text require the writer to monitor the composing process as he or she proceeds. Flower and Hayes believe that the writer must function as a "writing strategist [who] determines when the writer moves from one process to the next" ("A Cognitive Process Theory" 374). The writer/monitor establishes the goals for carrying out the writing processes and controls the sequence of writing processes, such as deciding when to stop generating and when to start organizing information. These decisions to move from one process to another are based on the goals for writing and the writer's personal habits or composing style (Hayes and Flower, "Writing"). What Flower and Hayes refer to as the monitor might also be

understood as what Murray calls "the other self." Murray says that the writer, though often working alone, converses with the other self to check the writer's progress:

> The self speaks, the other self listens and responds. The self proposes, the other self considers. The self makes, the other self evaluates. The two selves collaborate: a problem is spotted, discussed, defined; solutions are proposed, rejected, suggested, attempted, tested, discarded, accepted ("Teaching" 140).

Murray believes that the other self must be able to keep track of what the writer has on the page (where the writer is) and what the writer hopes is on the page (where the writer intends to go). He asserts that this monitoring and rethinking of writing are among the writer's most complex cognitive tasks. A writer who is efficient at monitoring his or her progress, perhaps knowing which strategy or plan is appropriate and/or when to switch strategies or update plans, will find it easier to begin and to continue writing. If a writer has trouble monitoring progress, blocking may occur or the writer may produce poorer quality prose than he or she is capable of.

Expert versus novice writers

Because composing is such a complex act, writers may compose in very different manners and with varying degrees of success. Using a cognitive model of composing explains successfully the different choices writers may make when they write. For example, writers may be vastly different in how they choose to represent the rhetorical problem to themselves. But besides studying the underlying mental processes writers use, cognitive researchers have also attempted to discover differences in composing methods among groups of writers. By studying these groups, researchers hope to discover precisely how the choices writers make differ. If teachers and researchers can learn how expert and novice writers compose differently, then it's possible that they'll discover important ways to overcome those differences and to help novice writers become more skilled, or blocked writers to compose fluently.

Two such groups are the expert writer and the novice writer. These groups are given various labels in the literature: experienced vs. inexperienced, good vs. poor, skilled vs. unskilled. The terms "expert" and "novice" can be applied to writers of all ages and professions. A young writer could still be an expert of sorts, while an adult writer could be seen as a novice,

based on the repertoire of strategies each brings to the task and the success each experiences with writing.

The important point is that expert writers and novice writers do differ significantly in the ways they approach the composing process, even when individual differences are allowed for. One of the most basic differences is the knowledge each has of his or her writing process. As Flower states, expert writers "not only have a large repertory of powerful strategies . . . they have sufficient self-awareness of their own process to draw on these alternative techniques as they need them. In other words, they guide their own creative process" (Problem-Solving 37). Expert writers combine an understanding, perhaps intuitive, of their personal writing process with the ability to change and alter that process as needed. Novice writers are usually much less aware of their own writing process and of their abilities to influence that process. Blocked writers are similar to novices in this respect--they sometimes think that composing successfully or at all depends only on inspiration (Rose, Writer's Block). They don't realize that they may be able to help themselves overcome blocks by switching tactics, such as brainstorming just to get started writing instead of waiting until inspired.

Setting goals One difference between expert and novice writers is the nature of the goals each sets--the goals that guide the writing forward or those that keep it from progressing, perhaps even setting the writer back. As discussed earlier, Flower and Hayes believe that goal-directed thinking is at the heart of composing, and the goals set by the writer guide further writing. These goals may involve global or local concerns. Flower and Hayes think that the middle-range goals, those that "Give substance and direction to the more abstract goals . . . and give more breadth and coherence about what to say next" reveal striking differences between the expert and novice ("A Cognitive Process Theory" 379). Expert writers are much more adept at considering a high-level goal (such as "to generate ideas") and then creating middle-range goals to develop the higher goal. Block-prone writers (as will be discussed in more detail later) frequently have trouble setting goals and working out reasonable plans. For example, blocked writers may try to work with a very abstract goal or overgeneralized plan, such as "appeal to the average person." Abstract goals and plans differ from higher-level ones because they are not operational. Rather than switching to a more appropriate goal or plan, some writers will block.

Experts more frequently revise their goals, based on what they have learned while writing or thinking. Novices, in contrast, tend to work with either very abstract goals or concentrate on lower-level goals, such as to immediately edit for spelling. Similarly, novice writers are not as skilled as experts are at developing new goals based on what's been learned. They do not recognize that goals are self-made, and thus are open to both success and failure. Expert writers also employ more networks of goals than do novices, some of which may be automatic. Automatic goals are those used and modified by writers so often that writers don't always have to consciously think about them. For example, journalists or writers working within a very specific genre are likely to have semi-automatic goals about the rhetorical situation and the proper tone to use, which they rely on without much thought.

Understanding the writing process Novice writers may also be hindered by their attitudes toward composing and by a lack of knowledge about the writing process. Some writers may believe that a successful composition is the result of inspiration, and that successful ideas only wait to be discovered. This common belief about

composing can have disastrous results for the novice (or blocked) writer, as Flower and Hayes note:

> The myth of discovery implies a method, and this method is based on the premise that hidden stores of insight and ready-made ideas exist, buried in the mind of the writer, waiting only to be 'discovered.' Or they are to be found in books and data if only the enterprising researcher knows where to look ("The Cognition of Discovery" 21).

When the "discovery" doesn't happen automatically, the novice writer may just give up--and even some expert writers may settle for less than they're actually capable of producing.

Blocked writers also sometimes have strong misconceptions about how composing should occur, as did one blocked writer who believed that writing always has to be rational and logical (Rose, Writer's Block). Often, blocked writers' attitudes about how they should or must compose limit their alternatives. For example, this same writer repeatedly tried to compose by framing blocks of information about her subject. Because in this particular instance she didn't have a clear idea of what she wanted to say or wanted to include, she was unable to write. The writer preferred not to use tactics such as freewriting, and she didn't know how to outline or sketch out ideas. Either of these alternatives might have

allowed her to write more easily--to not block (Rose, Writer's Block).

Developing the rhetorical problem In their study of expert and novice writers and the discovery process, Flower and Hayes found that expert writers may also be more skilled than novices at developing unique representations of the rhetorical problem. Expert writers tend to be much more concerned with every aspect of the rhetorical problem, including the audience, the assignment, and their own goals as writers, as opposed to concentrating on the conventions of the written text, which novice writers sometimes do. Flower and Hayes stress that one of the most striking differences is that expert writers create goals with regard to the audience, and in general spend more time "thinking about and commenting on the rhetorical problem, as opposed to spending that time generating text" ("The Cognition of Discovery" 29).

Expert writers are able to create an extended network of goals for affecting their audience, which also helps them generate ideas. Expert writers also continue to refine and develop their understanding of the rhetorical situation as they write. Some novice writers are unable or unwilling to redefine the rhetorical

problem and tend to spend the entire composing act working with the same representation of the writing task that they started with (Flower and Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery"). Blocked writers and novice writers are often alike in this respect. They sometimes get so caught up in local concerns that they can't see beyond the surface level to what they need to accomplish over all (Rose, Writer's Block).

Because novice writers are less adept at developing the rhetorical problem, they may fail to use or use less successfully the skills they have (Flower and Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery"). In other words, novice writers' representation of the rhetorical problem may not call on the writing skills and abilities they already possess. Blocked writers also are not necessarily lacking writing skill; expert writers block too. It is possible that expert writers are better problem-solvers in general because they've usually had more experience writing, which may have helped them reach the expert status. However, when faced with an extremely complex or overwhelming writing task, such as a doctoral dissertation, it could be that blocked expert writers' problem-solving skills can't overcome their anxiety, poor composing habits, and/or inappropriate composing strategies.

Organizing The differences between expert and novice writers extend thoughout the writing process. Besides defining and updating the rhetorical problem and generating material, the writer also has to be concerned with organization and structure. Yet Flower reports that expert and novice writers usually approach this concern from opposite directions. She believes that novice writers often prepare an outline and then attempt to fill it in. However, expert writers may generate/write first, then organize later (Problem-Solving).

The paradox of novice writers' premature concerns with organization and structure is that often their writing appears to be just the opposite: error-ridden, unorganized and illogical (Perl and Egendorf). Yet this doesn't mean that novice writers have a disorganized composing process; teachers may just assume their composing process is that way because of the problems in the produced text. Perl and Egendorf have observed that novice writers are "capable of engaging in consistent, well-ordered composing processes" (261).

One problem is that novice writers may too quickly apply a rule to what they've written. Blocked writers also sometimes internalize rules, such as "never use passive voice," which cause them to edit prematurely (Rose, Writer's Block). What happens when writers edit

prematurely is that local concerns (such as correcting grammar) take precedence over global ones--and it becomes difficult for the writers to keep track of what they want to accomplish. Insisting that what they have written conform immediately (to correct grammar, for example, or to an outline) keeps them from progressing and sometimes results in fragmentary text (Perl and Egendorf).

Revising Novice and expert writers also differ in their self-evaluation and revision tactics. Nancy Sommers surveyed 20 student writers (in their first semester of freshman composition) and 20 experienced writers (journalists, editors, and academics) concerning their revision strategies. Her findings illustrate significant differences between the two groups.

The student writers for the most part considered "revision" to be a term used by the teacher, one which they didn't use when referring to changes made in their drafts. Instead, they preferred expressions such as "Redoing" and "Slashing and Throwing Out." The students viewed revision primarily as a rewording activity and believed that the lexical changes made determined a composition's success or failure. This concern with surface "rewording" prevented students from seeing

problems at the deeper, textual level, and they lacked the strategies to repair those problems as well.

The student writers, like some blocked ones, also seemed to be overly concerned with what they thought were the rules of revising. They subordinated their specific problems in the text to whatever teacher or textbook rules they had previously been taught (Sommers). In another study of student writers, Richard Beach also noticed a similar division between revisers and nonrevisers. Extensive revisers were those who reevaluated their entire drafts and conducted major revisions. Nonrevisers tended to not revise at all or at the most revise very little. Extensive revisers (who were usually the more successful writers) evaluated first drafts for general patterns of development and major ideas; they then used this information to chart out a "conceptual blueprint or network of key ideas that they could carry over to the next draft" (162). The nonrevisers tended to rely on textbook terminology for labeling their writing problems, yet were unsure of how to solve them. As of now little research has been done investigating how writers may block when revising, but some blocked writers do tend to rely heavily on instruction picked up from teachers or textbooks (Rose,

Writer's Block). Blocked writers may also focus on surface concerns at the expense of more global ones.

Sommers found a notable contrast in purpose behind experienced writers' revisions when compared with the purposes of the students, namely that the experienced writers used revision as a discovery process while composing, but the students in general used revision to make surface changes. Whereas the experienced writers' first drafts usually involved various attempts to define their territory, they used the second draft to begin structuring patterns of development, deciding what additional information was needed and/or what should be left out.

Another difference between expert and novice revisers is their concepts of the reader. While student writers in Sommers' study tended to revise only for a "teacher-reader," the experienced writers "imagined a reader (reading their product) whose existence and whose expectations influence their revision process" (385). In other words, the students tried to revise according to a predefined teacher-based meaning, while the experienced writers modified their revisions according to their concept of a reader unique to each writing task. For the expert writer, it is the discrepancy between what the imagined reader judges the writing should include (the

writer's intentions) and what the text actually contains (the execution) that becomes the motivating force for revision.

Revision, as discussed earlier, is also a goal-directed process, and what a writer chooses to a accomplish during revision may be built into his or her personal representation of the task. Some decisions concerning what the writing task will call for may be conscious and others unconscious. In revision, as in the other composing processes, Flower et al. believe that the expert writer may automatically choose alternatives when revising, while the novice may not even be aware that other options exist. Even if the novice writer does know about other options, that writer must know when to use them. Such decisions can be difficult for any writer, especially when one tries to please an external teacher/reader or an internal reader who insists that all prose immediately conform to preexisting rules.

In general, then, expert and novice writers differ in their composing processes in several significant ways. Experts tend to be more knowledgeable about their own writing process, while novices may continue to wait for inspiration, even if that inspiration is slow to come. Experts have also been discovered to be more skilled at formulating and updating goals for composing. Novices,

on the other hand, tend to rely on either very abstract goals or very local ones. Novices also sometimes lack flexibility, as when trying to fill in an outline rather than generating information first and then organizing it. And experts have been shown to be more holistic, flexible, and successful at revision than novice writers.

Blocked writers, as mentioned previously, share certain characteristics with novice writers, such as being less proficient at setting workable goals for writing. However, (as was also noted earlier) what is surprising about writer's block is that expert writers, such as graduate students or college professors, sometimes block too (Bloom; Boice, "Cognitive Components). Included in the appendix, on page 111, is a comparison of the general characteristics of expert and novice writers to blocked and nonblocked writers.

An examination of cognitive explanations of writer's block can explain how blocked writers in general get slowed down when trying to compose. Unfortunately, studies have not yet been made of how expert and novice writers might block differently, such as whether or not expert writers block for the same reasons as do novice writers.

CHAPTER IV. COGNITIVE EXPLANATIONS OF WRITER'S BLOCK

Recent research in composition has shown that writer's block is a multifaceted problem. For example, blocked writers may function with both rigidly invoked rules and abstract or inappropriate plans, rather than only one or the other (Rose, Writer's Block). Blocked writers also show some of the same behaviors when composing that nonblocked writers do. Blocked and nonblocked writers alike report experiencing work apprehension. Both groups frequently express their dislike of writing--that writing is hard and complicated. Work apprehension also includes worries about not having enough ideas, other commitments and duties with which writing interferes, such as teaching, and the realization that the writing is not likely to survive the editorial or grading process. Blocked writers, however, experience work apprehension much more frequently than nonblocked writers (Boice, "Cognitive Components"). In general, as explained by a cognitive composing model, blocked writers tend to have trouble applying and understanding workable rules for writing, using appropriate plans and strategies, and refraining from editing too soon in the

writing process. Writer's block is also sometimes attributed to an overly harsh "internal critic."

Rules

According to Flower and Hayes' cognitive model, writers appear to apply rules during a subprocess of composing, perhaps under the translating or reviewing process (although it could be hypothesized that rules could be applied at any stage, even during generating). Blocked writers, like novice ones, sometimes try to work with inappropriate rules which slow them down rather than guide them. In a study of five blocked and five nonblocked writers at UCLA, Rose found that "the five students who were experiencing blocking were all operating either with writing rules or with planning strategies that impeded rather than enhanced the composing process" ("Rigid Rules" 390).

Rose defines a rule as "a linguistic, sociolinguistic, formal, or process directive," such as "try to use the active voice when writing" (Writer's Block 4). All writers in Rose's study relied on rules at times when writing, but the nonblocked students were more flexible in their adherence to rules and plans and more adaptable to changes based on the writing task and the emerging text.

Rose identifies rules as necessary for most human behavior; in writing, they direct a writer's response to the writing task. He also distinguishes between two types of rules used by writers: algorithms and heuristics. Algorithms are specific rules that result in specific answers if applied to a certain problem, such as a mathematical one. Heuristics are more general rules that allow for flexibility. Heuristics don't offer precise answers but rather present alternative solutions ("Rigid Rules"). Heuristics can provide a writer with functional rules for composing. Rose defines a functional rule as a "complex mental statement" that takes into consideration the writing context and the writer's purpose: "Functional rules embody situational alternatives, are more involved than the algorithmic rules of mathematical operations. Functional composing rules are flexible, multioperational" (Writer's Block 79). Blocked writers, rather than applying heuristics to compose fluently, use algorithmic-type rules, such as "never use the personal pronoun 'I' when writing an essay."

Nonblocked students tend to rely more on heuristics, which open up alternatives during composing, than on algorithms. In addition, according to Rose, nonblockers seem to have one rule which supersedes the others, one

such as "If a rule conflicts with what is sensible or with experience, reject it" ("Rigid Rules" 396-397). Rose labels this type of rule a "meta-rule." "Glenn," one student whom Rose studied that didn't block, composed with such a meta-rule. Rose says this rule "directs him to consider the context and effectiveness of his writing before acting on text or teacher rules" (Writer's Block 65). The nonblockers' rules are sometimes vague. These vague rules, however, are not rigidly prescriptive, so they allow the writers to compose fluently.

This vagueness could be what distinguishes a functional composing process. The rules used by a nonblocker may also be vague because they are habitual; that is, the writer has used and modified the rules many times, and thus the fluent writer knows from experience if they're applicable or not.

Some nonblockers also show a concern for feedback--they attempt to test their writing and strategies for writing against their interpretation of the audience's needs (Rose, "Rigid Rules"). This concern for the audience is an important part of fluent and successful writers' goal-setting process. Rose also found in one study that nonblocked students "expressed 17 times as many rules as [blockers], and one-quarter of the nonfunctional rules" (Writer's Block 71). A nonblocked

writer is more selective of which rule he or she applies and seems to understand which rules will be appropriate to the writing situation. In other words, a nonblocked writer is more likely to reject rules that will hinder the given writing task, while a blocked writer will apply the rule regardless of its utility.

Blocked writers aren't necessarily using incorrect rules--they just aren't flexible in their usage. Blocked writers tend to adhere to rules absolutely, as if they are algorithms. Blockers also seem removed from corrective feedback and seem unable to interpret and test the rules they apply to the writing task (Rose, "Rigid Rules"). Blocking may also occur if a rule presents the writer with too few or too many alternatives (Rose, Writer's Block). For example, writers trying to compose an essay could block if they applied a rule such as, "always include everything you know," because they might have so many ideas that they can't decide where to begin.

Many of the rules blocked writers invoke apparently come from previous instruction--either through a teacher and/or a text. "Liz," one blocked writer Rose studied, seemed to use a number of rules learned from a previous writing text, such as one which advocated that "word choice should not be too simple" (Writer's Block 49). Liz applied this and other rules absolutely. Rose

believes she either interpreted them in such terms on her own, or the text was interpreted so by former instructors. Some of the rules used by Liz were legitimate and might have actually helped her writing if she hadn't applied them so early in her writing process. Liz also admitted to not knowing what all of the rules she adhered to meant. Rose believes that Liz's absolutism caused her at times to turn "heuristic guidelines into narrow injunctions" (Writer's Block 50).

Writing teachers may consciously or unconsciously stress rules in part because rules can help make a complex and mysterious process (such as writing) more understandable and less threatening (Rose, Writer's Block). Students also sometimes ask for and expect to receive rules as well. Rose says that textbooks have also been guilty of oversimplifying the writing process. But, Rose argues, when the writing process is oversimplified and/or teachers zealously invoke rules, such guidance may be interpreted inappropriately:

> rigid rules focus the writer's mind too narrowly, don't allow him to work effectively with the large issues of the writing task. They also skew his linguistic and rhetorical judgments. True, writing--like any nonrandom intellectual task--is rule-governed behavior, but . . . the rules in the fluent writer's mind are, for the most part, multioptional and flexible (Writer's Block 90).

Nonblocked writers are able to distinguish which rules are applicable while blocked writers tend to treat all rules as alike, regardless of the rules' original purpose or source. Blocked writers in particular may be unable to question a rule's validity, which is understandable considering that many rules come from the "authority" of teacher or textbook.

Plans and strategies

Rigid rules can develop when a writer relies too heavily for composing on one plan or ritual that has worked in the past. Overdependence on one strategy can make the writer believe there are few alternatives for composing if he or she becomes blocked (Flower, Problem-Solving). Plans may be long-term and global or short-term and immediate. For example, a long-term plan might be to write an early draft to sketch out ideas and then go back to restructure and revise. A short-term plan would be to brainstorm just to think of possible ideas or to get started.

But Rose makes some important distinctions between plans and heuristics. Both are flexible, yet plans subsume rules--heuristics or algorithms. Plans are larger and more encompassing than rules and can become more complex. Complex plans can be made up in part by a

series of algorithms and heuristics, and by smaller plans. Plans also incorporate information gained during composing itself--in other words, plans depend on and use feedback ("Rigid Rules").

Writers may also rely on "sets." A set is a habitual reaction one has to certain situations, developed and established consciously and unconsciously, through instruction and experience. For example, a student writer may have a cognitive set concerning how to write a paper for a science class and then find composing for humanities classes quite different. Rose describes a set as a "cognitive habit" that is a much narrower response than heuristics or plans; a cognitive set doesn't include alternative actions for dealing with the current situation or for planning future response ("Rigid Rules"). If the writer relies on a cognitive set in the appropriate context, as is the case when a writer familiar with science composes for a science assignment, the writer is likely to write fluently. However, chances are the writer will block if he or she lacks an appropriate set or knowledge of alternatives.

Blocked writers tend to operate with what Rose calls "cognitive static blueprints" rather than with plans ("Rigid Rules" 398). Rather than freeing the blocked writer for new possibilities, these inflexible blueprints

remain the same throughout the composing situation. The blocked writers are hampered even more because they tend not to use feedback or to test their plans. This behavior keeps them in the same composing rut and limits their chances for improvements in the future.

Blocked writers also tend to plan in increments while writing, instead of forming and adjusting global plans before and during writing (Rose, Writer's Block). Rose believes that for incremental plans to be successful, the writer must have an understanding of the "discourse frame" the text encompasses; the writer must be able to relate units of the text and use transitions; the writer must rescan the text (seeking corrective feedback); and the writer must be able to devise a "solution" to the rhetorical problem presented by the writing task (Writer's Block). Not all writers who plan in increments are able to accomplish these tasks, and some writers plan in increments because that's the only way they know how. Blocked writers are often in a double bind: they may be trying to plan in such a way that requires abilities and skills they may not possess, yet they lack the flexibility to switch to another more workable plan or strategy.

Global strategies are used by two times as many nonblocked writers as blocked. According to Rose,

nonblocked writers tend to be in conflict (wrestling with a decision about the writing task) one-eighth as many times as do blocked writers. When nonblockers are in conflict, it is usually for a short period and because of local concerns (Writer's Block). Liz, the blocked writer discussed previously, relied on no overall plan for the essay she composed during Rose's study and said that she rarely uses a structured plan of any kind (such as an outline or notes). She relied instead on a mental plan that she devised as she wrote, and she ran out of time. Rose believes that Liz plans incrementally because she has trouble with multifaceted topics. She doesn't use any structured planning strategies because she doesn't have them in her repertoire. She may also have trouble planning because she believes that composing should be an "unstructured discovery" (Writer's Block 52).

Flower and Hayes suggest that all writers possess alternative procedures they can use when writing, but that "[they] may not have enough self-conscious awareness of [their] own skills to invoke them when needed" ("Problem-Solving" 270-271). A writer may also be working with a "plan" that is so abstract, such as "write a lot no matter what the assignment or topic" that he or she will not be able or even know how to carry it out.

Some nonblocked writers also work without structured plans, but they don't plan incrementally. Other nonblocked writers may rely on more structured plans, but modify them according to the writing task. For example, a writer may adapt the classic five-paragraph theme pattern. A nonblocked writer may also rely on traditional written plans, such as a detailed outline. According to Rose, nonblocked writers may possess a "storehouse of forms normally thought to be fairly inflexible," such as the five-paragraph theme, and they then choose to work with, modify, or ignore these plans or strategies (Writer's Block 75). In contrast, blocked writers may simply rush to get through or become stymied because they have limited plans to work with and/or a sense of limited options (Selfe, "An Apprehensive Writer").

Premature editing

Editing is an important part of the reviewing process that can interrupt writing at any time. Rose thinks that all writers edit in some manner from the point when they first begin writing. Blocked writers, however, often begin to edit much sooner than other writers (Rose, Writer's Block). Protocols have revealed that most nonblocked writers are able to avoid editing

too soon by some sort of mental strategy, such as marking a possibly misspelled word to return to later, rather than correcting it immediately (Rose, Writer's Block).

Premature editing can have at least five possible causes, some of which may function together (Rose, Writer's Block). One, according to Rose, is "lack of confidence in one's mechanical/grammatical skills," causing the writer to diligently correct errors while writing (Writer's Block 73). Another is the writer's planning style, such as planning in increments rather than constructing an overall plan. A third possible cause is "single drafting," trying to get by with writing only one draft by scrutinizing it as it is being written. A fourth cause may by the writer's rules and assumptions about composing, such as relying on inspiration to begin or a rule which says "always write a five paragraph theme." A fifth cause may be the writer's attitude towards composing. For example, one of Rose's blocked subjects spent too much time trying to compose because she enjoyed searching for precisely the right word or phrase--at the expense of writing progress. Another subject who was relatively inexperienced with writing but did not block tended to view an essay as another assignment to complete, so she would go ahead and work through it just to finish.

Rose believes that some teachers may encourage "playing around" with language for good reason--but "simple fluency cannot be overlooked" (Writer's Block 73). If the writer concentrates on features such as finding a certain word or phrase, he or she may be unable to continue writing. This reinforces Selfe's view that if the writer focuses exclusively on surface features early during the composing process, the writer may lose his or her overall train of thought. Premature editing also creates an erratic composing rhythm and may distract the writer from more global concerns, such as considering which information might be most important for the audience's needs ("An Apprehensive Writer").

Self-evaluation

Some theorists attribute writer's block in part to a writer's harsh "internal critic." Flower says that this critic can surface at the wrong time: the internal critic "pounces on every scrap as it's written rejecting the writer's half-formed thoughts because they are disorganized or don't sound like a polished piece of writing" (Problem-Solving 32).

Similarly, Rose has found that blocked writers do engage in more negative evaluations of their work than do nonblocked writers. Often these evaluations are aimed at

something specific, such as a word or a phrase that violates a writer's rule. However, blocked and nonblocked writers alike seem able to approve of what they have written, and both groups can correctly interpret how others perceive their work. Rose believes that writers' attitudes seem related more to their sense of their writing abilities in general than to the fact that they are blocked:

> Some [blockers] . . . liked to write very much, and, though [blockers] did level more negative evaluations at specific productions than did [nonblockers], the ratio was not all that disproportionate. Writer's block, then, cannot simply be blamed on a nagging internalized parent or critic (Writer's Block 76).

Writers, blocked or not, might be giving negative evaluations of their work in part because of frustration. Their experiences with writing may not have enabled them to develop many strategies to fall back on, which is troubling for any writer.

Cognitive researchers, then, have attempted to show what part cognition plays in understanding writer's block. Blocked writers do use rules, set goals, make plans, and develop strategies, yet they often do so without the proficiency of nonblocked writers. For blocked writers plans and rules do not always facilitate

progress; they do just the opposite and limit or stop the writing. In general, blocked writers' composing methods seem to be distinguished by a lack of flexibility and a lack of alternatives.

Blocked writers do not necessarily avoid writing, as apprehensive writers have been found to do (Daly). Nor are all apprehensive writers blocked. Nonetheless, a writer's cognitive skills are not unaffected by the writer's emotions or environment. The next section will discuss reasons other than cognitive ones that may be given to explain why a writer blocks.

CHAPTER V. OTHER INFLUENCES ON WRITER'S BLOCK

Cognitive skills and abilities do not operate in isolation from other aspects of the writer's life. Reed Larson, on the basis of his studies of adolescent writers, believes that "success in writing depends in part on the relationship a writer has with the ongoing work" (39-40). This relationship is influenced by the writer's emotions regarding writing and the writer's enjoyment of the work, as well as by his or her writing skills. Research has shown that the blocked writer may be experiencing writing apprehension and that personality traits may affect the writer's writing process. The writer may also be influenced by the social context of the writing.

Writing apprehension

Writer's block may be influenced by writing apprehension, sometimes called writing anxiety, and defined by Merle O'Rourke Thompson as "a fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write" (1). Blocked writers not suffering from writing apprehension may feel confident of their abilities and yet remain unable to produce. However, apprehensive writers (whether blocked or not) may seem

unusually fearful of writing, perhaps even going to great lengths to avoid it (Daly).

Writing apprehension manifests itself in many ways. The apprehensive student writer usually lacks confidence in his or her ability to be successful in a writing course, and thus tries to avoid such courses. The apprehensive student writer may even switch majors to one that's viewed as requiring less writing (and the same is true for careers). Part of the student's apprehension may be related to how he or she has done in previous writing courses (Daly).

The results of student writing apprehension are usually obvious to the teacher. The student's paper may be turned in late, and/or show signs of being hastily dashed off. Or the paper may show signs of being written very laboriously and produced with much anguish. The anxious students themselves may take to visiting the instructor's office frequently, missing class, or dropping class altogether (Thompson). Blocked writers may also turn in rushed or late papers, and, as a result, their grades may not reflect their actual writing ability (Rose, "Rigid Rules").

Selfe studied one writer whose apprehension manifested itself in prolonged procrastination when she was faced with a writing task. The writer had

"ritualized" procrastination to the degree that it was a part of her composing process. The writer would routinely receive an assignment and put it away after noting the due date on a calendar. Then she would wait to work on the assignment until the day before it was due, when the pressure of having to turn it in would supersede her fears about writing ("An Apprehensive Writer").

Selfe describes the behavior of this apprehensive writer as being logical in its own way. Nothing in the writer's paper can be criticized until something is written. When something is written at the last possible moment, then the writer is free to blame failure or disappointment with the writing on the circumstances under which it was produced ("An Apprehensive Writer"). Whether blocked or not, students who procrastinate and focus only on the deadline are prevented from analyzing their own writing process. Thus, blocked writers may never gain the self-knowledge to understand what they could do to compose fluently.

The apprehensive writer may in fact be aware that his or her composing skills are limited. But because the writer is so afraid to write, he or she avoids writing at all costs. Thus, there is little chance for the writer to improve and develop the skills and abilities that he

or she has (Selfe, "An Apprehensive Writer"). The composing strategies used by the apprehensive writer and his or her fears often work together to increase the writer's anxiety and further inhibit composing. The same is true for the blocked writer. Because the writer is blocked, he or she doesn't gain the additional experience which might develop alternate plans and strategies for writing and the knowledge of when to use them.

Anxious writers, like blocked ones, do not always have limited composing skills. Larson studied one severely anxious writer, a high school junior, who was having difficulty writing a research paper. The writer had completed similar tasks in the past and had received As and Bs for her work. This writer initially felt positive about the project, but as it progressed she had difficulty narrowing her focus. She felt unsure about her topic and how to organize it, and soon began to doubt her abilities. As a result of these and other negative emotions, Larson says the writer felt "confused, overwhelmed, and unable to find time to work on her paper" (22).

Apprehensive writers have been found to differ markedly from nonapprehensive writers in their pre-drafting strategies. Selfe, in a study of first semester freshman composition students, found that the two groups

predrafted in entirely different manners. The apprehensive writers approached writing assignments with fear and a lack of confidence in their abilities to complete it successfully. Nonapprehensive students were the opposite: they exhibited confidence and expectations of success. The apprehensive students appeared to be less adept at getting important information about the organization of the task and the audience from reading the assignment, when compared with the nonapprehensive ones. The apprehensive writers were also less likely than nonapprehensive writers to use what information they did have to plan their essays. Apprehensive writers were also more likely to devote most of their time to local planning strategies, while the nonapprehensive writers devoted more time to developing global plans. The apprehensive writers spent less time than the nonapprehensive writers at written prefiguring (making organizational notes), and they appeared to use what prefiguring they had prepared in more limited ways than those who were not apprehensive (Selfe, "The Predrafting Processes").

Some of what's been discovered about apprehensive writers can be correlated to research on blocked writers. As discussed elsewhere, Rose has found that blocked writers also tend to employ incremental planning

strategies as opposed to more global ones (Writer's Block). Boice, in his study of blocked and nonblocked academicians, discovered that work apprehension dominates the thinking of blocked and nonblocked writers alike ("Cognitive Components"). However, Rose sees writer's block as a broader concept than that of writing apprehension. Not all blocked writers react anxiously towards writing, nor do blocked writers necessarily avoid writing or majors and careers associated with writing. Rose believes that writing apprehension may serve as a possible contributor to blocking or may result as a consequence of blocking (Writer's Block). It is easy to see how prolonged blocking could sap a writer's self-confidence, making a writer more anxious the next time he or she approached a writing task.

One important distinction to be made between writing apprehension and writer's block is that some anxiety can be viewed as a normal aspect of most composing. J. Daniel Rudy believes that all writing assignments induce some writing anxiety because "there is no concealing the fact that an assignment remains an expectation of performance" (42). Rudy stresses that both teachers and students need to realize that this anxiety is a natural part of composing for most writers--and that writing anxiety can be an asset as long as it doesn't become

insurmountable for the writer. By emphasizing the writing process as a series of "small steps forward," the teacher can help the writer spread the anxiety throughout the composing act and thus learn to deal with it effectively (Rudy 42).

Barbara Cheshire has also found that apprehension to some degree motivates writing, when combined with adequate writing skills. The anxiety enhances the writing only to the degree that it doesn't overwhelm, however. Writers may also suffer if they are underaroused, which is characterized by a lack of motivation (Larson). If a writer isn't challenged, interested, and/or engaged by the task, then boredom can set in.

Cheshire thinks that writing apprehension usually isn't a serious problem for most writers. In classes she has taught, Cheshire says one or two students typically will score very low on a writing apprehension test, while three or four students will score as highly apprehensive. Her results suggest that for the majority of the class some anxiety may be a normal part of composing, and that a relatively small percentage of the class will need individual help from the instructor with regard to writing apprehension and the blocking it can cause. It would be interesting and valuable to know what percentage

of a typical writing class experiences significant blocking. In the fall of 1987, I asked one class of my freshman composition students how many had experienced a serious writing block, "serious" meaning a block which was very difficult to overcome, possibly lasting several days. Of the approximately 25 students present, three raised their hands. Though informal, these results are similar to Cheshire's findings on writing anxiety.

Personality factors

There is little reseach concerning the effect of a writer's personality on the writing process, but George Jensen and John DiTiberio suggest that C. J. Jung's conceptual framework of the personality "can, if used judiciously, provide teachers with valuable insight into how students differ" (286).

Jung's personality theory is based on four bi-polar dimensions: Extroversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, and Judging-Perceiving. People use each of these dimensions daily, yet they usually prefer one dimension in each pair over another dimension. The preferred process usually matures more quickly, while the unpreferred process lags behind and may remain underdeveloped (Jensen and DiTiberio). Jensen and DiTiberio, based on observational studies of writers,

have found that the usage of the preferred vs. unpreferred processes may affect writers' performances:

> we have observed that writers can perform better and with less anxiety when they employ primarily their preferred processes in early stages, while still generating ideas, and then use their unpreferred processes in later stages to round out their writing. Writers become anxious or emotionally blocked when they overuse one process to the neglect of its opposite (e.g., use feeling to the neglect of thinking) or when they fail to use the strengths of their preferences . . . (287).

Jensen and DiTiberio have not tested Jung's theory experimentally and are cautious about their findings, but they've discovered specific differences in how writers write, according to the writers' preferences in each of the personality dimensions.

Extroversion and Introversion Extroverts focus their energy outward, and they find it easiest to develop their topic when they can interact with others. Therefore, Jensen and DiTiberio believe that extroverts may block when the writer doesn't receive oral feedback, causing the extrovert's writing process to become too isolated. Introverts tend to focus more of their energy inward, and they seem to prefer writing most of the text "in their heads" before they actually compose with pen

and paper. But introverts may get so caught up in mental planning that they block.

Sensing and Intuition As its name suggests, sensing "involves the direct and conscious use of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, or touching to record carefully the particulars of one's environment" (Jensen and DiTiberio 290). Sensing types are detail-oriented, practical, and matter-of-fact. They may become blocked if given general instructions which they cannot in some way translate into a precise set of expectations. Sensing types may try to apply specific instructions or patterns for writing too rigidly (such as completing four paragraphs and remaining convinced that they must write a five paragraph theme). They may also become overwhelmed when faced with a large amount of information (Jensen and DiTiberio).

Jensen and DiTiberio define intuition as involving the use of "impressions, hunches, and the imagination to perceive patterns, relationships, and configurations" (290). Intuitives are more idea-oriented, prefer the abstract, and are stimulated by conceptual complexities. Intuitive types appreciate originality, but their search for uniqueness can also block them. In addition, intuitive writers' drafts can become so complex that they

will become confused and possibly block (Jensen and DiTiberio).

Thinking and Feeling Thinking and feeling refer to one's evaluation, judgment, and decision making process. Thinking types are concerned with having objective criteria for decisions, and they desire to do what is "right," sometimes at the expense of others' feelings. They also like to categorize information and prefer analytical assignments. If a writing assignment does not have precise and objective standards for performance, thinking types may become blocked because they view the assignment as meaningless (Jensen and DiTiberio).

Feeling types tend to be much more subjective, are concerned about personal values, and place a high value on group harmony. Feeling types may become blocked if a writing project does not concern something they value personally or does not affect someone else. Their attention to audience may also concern them more than content and organization, so they may block if convinced that an audience will be bored by their writing or that their ideas are inadequate. They can also exhibit a perfectionist concern to please the reader (Jensen and DiTiberio).

Judging and Perceiving Judging and perceiving, according to Jensen and DiTiberio, "describe how individuals approach tasks in the outer world" (294). Judging types are concerned with completing tasks that they have set for themselves. They enjoy problem-solving and seeing a project through to its finish. Judging types also tend to be proficient at making decisions. They may block and become anxious, however, if faced with unexpected developments, such as emergencies or "last-minute information" (295).

Judging types like to finish first drafts quickly, but their need to complete projects can also block them, because they may start to write too soon, needing instead to spend more time in research. If they haven't generated or gathered enough information, their writing may progress very slowly. They also sometimes follow plans too closely, when the plans should be revised or reevaluated (Jensen and DiTiberio).

Perceiving types prefer little structure and sometimes leave projects without finishing them. They may need deadlines to complete tasks, and they tend to resist narrowing their focus, sometimes only doing so after being forced by an approaching deadline. Jensen and DiTiberio believe "How effectively they limit their topic will determine whether they finish the assignment

at the last minute, late, or at all" (297). Perceiving types may put off writing because they want to research another source, and they may block if they feel they have inadequate information to start writing. Perceiving types may become perfectionistic in a desire for thoroughness (Jensen and DiTiberio).

Jensen and DiTiberio believe their findings need to be supported by more research in composition, but that Jung's model does suggest why and how students differ in writing styles and behavior. A writer's weakness could be matched with a contrasting strength. For example, a student may not pay enough attention to mechanics, yet his or her writing might contain innovative ideas. Likewise, if a student is blocked, the teacher may be able to adjust teaching strategies to work better with the student's personality type (such as providing an analytically-geared student with a precise rationale for the writing task). A writer's personality type may influence the cognitive strategies employed, as well as indicate possible reasons for writing apprehension. For example, a writer who adhered rigidly to an early plan could be called a primarily judging type, and a perceiving type writer could tend to edit prematurely. Of course, each dimension interacts with the others, and a writer doesn't use only the perceiving dimension or the

judging dimension. Nevertheless, consideration of writers' preferred processes vs. their unpreferred ones may explain why writers make some of the choices they do.

Discourse communities

A cognitive model may offer a concise explanation of writers' mental processes, but it doesn't specify how writers deal with the context of the writing task. The situation in which the writer is being required to write can greatly influence the success with which the writer completes the task.

Regardless of the underlying mental processes engaged, what and how a writer composes can't be separated from the situation in which the writing is accomplished. The writing act is influenced by the conditions that enable the writer to write and the writer's motives for writing. As James Reither notes, "Writing is, in fact, one of those processes which, in its use, creates and constitutes its own contexts" (621). If writing is taught or learned without acknowledging or understanding the writer's relationship to the world, the writer may very well have trouble writing. What this means is that researchers and writers alike must focus not only on the mental processes that enable writing to occur but also on how writers are engaged in a social act

and process--how they relate to others influenced by the writing task and how what they write relates to previous texts. The writing process and product, according to Reither, are both aspects of the "same social process" (625).

Bizzell and others agree that writers function within discourse communities. Bizzell argues that all humans can learn language and form concepts, but as humans develop they use "thought patterns" to categorize and understand experience:

> The mature exercise of these thought and language capacities takes place in society, in interaction with other individuals, and this interaction modifies the individual's reasoning, speaking, and writing within society. Groups of society members can become accustomed to modifying each other's reasoning and language use in certain ways. Eventually, these familiar ways achieve the status of conventions that bind the group in a discourse community, at work together on some project of interaction with the material world (214).

Writers can belong to several discourse communities, but whether or not they are an actual part of that community will be determined in part by their previous experience with and knowledge of it. For example, a college student belongs to the discourse community of the classroom (established and defined by the teacher) and to the discourse community of his or her intimate friends. The

two communities might overlap, but they could also function very differently. A student often has to appropriate an entirely different way of writing for an academic context than for communicating only with close friends.

If a writer must become familiar with the specialized discourse of a certain community, or perhaps of several communities, he or she could easily become blocked when in unfamiliar territory. The writer's potential problems could go beyond finding the right words to use. Bizzell believes that "Producing text within a discourse community, then, cannot take place unless the writer can define her goals in terms of the community's interpretive conventions" (227). In other words, the writer has to be familiar with how the rest of the community interprets, questions, and communicates about a particular topic before he or she can decide what the writing task calls for.

If writers are unable to define appropriate goals, they may simply rely on goals (or plans or strategies) that have been successful in the past. Students may also try to understand what's needed based on the writing assignment. If the assignment is not specific about the teacher's expectations, students may be unable to fully

understand or develop the rhetorical problem because they aren't members of the teacher's discourse community.

For example, Bartholomae calls this difficulty faced by student writers "inventing the university":

> The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of our community (134).

Teachers often require students to speak and write in the language of the academic community before the student has or knows how to use the appropriate skills.

Writing with the discourse of a particular community requires the writer to behave as though already comfortable with the discourse conventions, which is sometimes very difficult. Bartholomae says that the writer must function as "either equal to or more powerful than those she would address" (140). In other words, students have to know what the teacher knows, including how he or she would approach the assignment. The writer has to assume this position of power, even if she or he doesn't have this knowledge. If writers are unable to accomplish this, the result may be muddled prose or a case of writer's block.

When writers place themselves within a certain community, they must have knowledge of both the subject per se and of how the subject has been previously interpreted. They also have to decide how their text will relate to previous ones. Bartholomae believes that successful student writers often place themselves in their writing against what they see as a more naive view: "The writer continually audits and pushes against a language that would render him 'like everyone else' and mimics the language and interpretive systems of the priviledged community" (157). By working against what they see as a common view, students are thus able to give themselves privilege.

If students' assessment of what they are working against or their view of how they fit within a particular community is inaccurate, their writing is not likely to be successful. When students are unable to imagine or construct such a position, they may write poorly or block. As illustration of these notions, Dan Douglas and Larry Selinker believe that second language learners create personalized contexts for tests, whether or not that context is specified. For example, if the test involves describing how to put together an evening meal, the student will have his or her own idea about how many courses should be served, the place setting to be used,

etc. The test may or may not outline what the student should include, and even if it does, the student's internal context for "what's included in an evening meal" may be very different. The closer the personalized context is to the context of the writer of the test, the more likely the test will actually measure the taker's abilities. Although Douglas and Selinker's research wasn't applied specifically to native English writers, it still suggests that how easily (or successfully) a writer will compose may relate to how well the writer's understanding of the context of the writing task matches the intentions of the person who originated it.

Douglas and Selinker believe that an important part of this internalized context may be the writer's "discourse domains," defined as "a personally, and internally created 'slice' of one's life that has importance and over which the learner exercises content control" (206). When language users apply their internalized contexts against others', they have three options: 1) to use already existing domains, 2) to create new and/or temporary contexts, or 3) to not do anything--being unable to deal with the new situation (Douglas and Selinker). Writers may block when their internalized contexts do not correspond with those

required by writing task, and they are unable to create new contexts.

Within a discourse community, an overlapping of domains must occur. The writer must consider both personal needs and what he or she perceives as the needs of the audience and the task's purpose. Again, if the writer isn't familiar with the appropriate conventions of the community (stylistic and interpretive) and how the community members' discourse domains overlap, then the writing task may become too overwhelming. As a result, the writer is likely to block or produce poor quality prose.

In chapters four and five I have discussed how writer's block may occur and what may influence it. As was stated in the introduction, at this time no clear consensus exists concerning the best way to help a blocked writer. However, general conclusions and implications for teaching can be drawn, based on what has been discovered about writer's block and what still needs to be studied.

CHAPTER VI. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Researchers agree that most writers are blocked at one time or another. Writing blocks may even be a normal part of the writer's development. In fact, Donald Graves believes that teachers should expect children to block as they mature as writers: "Children grow as writers because they solve problems in composing, and the patterns of that growth are generally predictable. Sometimes the problem is greater than some children can momentarily handle, and progress in writing is blocked" (17). Usually a young writer, however, is blocked only temporarily.

As the above implies, writing blocks are not always a negative occurrence. The blocking may simply be a signal that more time is needed for critical thinking and reflection about the writing task. Murray acknowledges the necessity of the temporary delay: "It is essential to let writing grow within the writer, accepting the doing nothing that is essential for writing" ("The Essential Delay" 225-226). Murray and others believe that this delay may mean that the writer <u>needs</u> to wait for more information, for a sense of direction (a "map" for writing), or for the voice that may emerge in the

text. A blocked writer may be "writing" without even realizing it--perhaps mentally forming the pre-text of what's to be written or developing a plan for action.

But how do writers know when a temporary delay is really a counterproductive block? Rose believes part of the answer lies in the writer's response to the situation--the writer becomes unduly vexed when the writing doesn't happen. He says that when the truly blocked writer does try to write, "Inner conflicts manifest themselves in jumbled syntax and unclear diction" (When a Writer Can't Write ix). In particular, a blocked writer will be unable to break free from the block, will remain frightened or intimidated by the writing task, and/or will perpetuate unproductive composing habits and patterns (Rose, When a Writer Can't Write).

Certainly there are times when writer's block can't be ignored or waited upon. After all, in most cases writers have to write, especially if a student wants to pass a composition class or a professional writer wants to continue his or her career. So what can be done about writer's block?

The purpose of this chapter is not to offer guaranteed "solutions" for writer's block, but rather to outline implications for composition teachers and others

interested in this composing process problem. Included will be a discussion of strategies often used for overcoming writer's block, the teacher's role in helping the blocked student, the need for a broad theoretical framework to understand writer's block, and areas in need of additional research.

Strategies for overcoming writer's block

Two common remedies often suggested for writer's block are the use of generating activities and the development of time management techniques and goal-directed behavior.

Generating techniques

Central to the idea of a cognitive composing model is that strategies used by successful and fluent writers can be learned by less successful and/or blocked ones. Operating under this assumption, teachers may advocate various generating activities to help a blocked writer start composing.

One such technique is freewriting, an activity in which the writer is required to write nonstop for 10 or 15 minutes without worrying about content or correctness and without pausing to reconsider what's been written. Peter Elbow believes that freewriting can help "turn off" a particularly insistent internal editor, because the

writer isn't permitted to stop and evaluate the writing for grammatical correctness or for effectiveness of ideas.

Freewriting, though a popular classroom exercise, is not necessarily proven to help blocked and/or anxious writers, however. Cheshire, in a study designed to test whether or not writing anxiety was reduced by regular freewriting, found that "freewriting did not produce significant affects on fluency . . . . It also did not produce measureable differences in writing apprehension" (3). One potential problem blocked students face when advised to freewrite is that they may find it hard at first to follow the one rule of freewriting: to keep writing (Oliver). Another frustration for some students is making sense out of the chaos on the page and disorientation in the writer that freewriting sometimes produces (Boice and Meyers). Rather than focusing students, freewriting may only confuse them (Rose, Writer's Block).

A technique similar to freewriting is what Sheridan Blau has labeled "invisible writing." Invisible writing involves having the student write on a blank piece of paper with a spent ballpoint pen. Underneath the paper is a sheet of carbon paper followed by another sheet of

blank paper. The key to invisible writing is that the writer is not allowed to rescan what's been written.

Although the classroom applications of invisible writing have not been tested, Blau believes it may make writing first drafts easier, prevent premature editing, and reduce the writer's self-consciousness. Invisible writing allows writers to concentrate on what they want to say and helps them postpone the editing process. However, it's doubtful that invisible writing would help all blocked writers (and Blau doesn't advocate it as such). For example, while the technique would likely help certain kinds of blocked writers, such as those operating under a rule to perfect prose immediately, it probably wouldn't help those who may block because they lack alternative plans for organizing material.

Another common generating activity is brainstorming, described by Flower and Hayes as "a form of creative goal-directed play" ("Problem-Solving" 273). As with freewriting, writers who are brainstorming are instructed to compose without censoring their ideas or their text. Brainstorming differs from freewriting because it is more purposeful. Flower and Hayes believe freewriting is a form of free association, while brainstorming focuses on problems or issues "simmering" in the writer's mind. However, they recognize that brainstorming "is an

acquired skill and may go against the grain for writers geared to producing usable prose on a first sitting" (281).

Freewriting and brainstorming aren't the only generating methods used to help unblock a stymied writer. Sentence-combining, clustering of ideas, and other heuristics, such as the journalistic questions who-what-when-where-why-how, are also used to help writers get started. One danger with the use of activities such as freewriting and brainstorming is that students could interpret them absolutely, not realizing that the appropriate use of any heuristic is related to a specific writing task (Rose, Writer's Block). In other words, students might misinterpret such strategies as being applicable to any and all writing situations. Rose believes that, in general, the more knowledge of alternative strategies a student possesses the better; however, the belief that one strategy works for all tasks does students little good.

Nevertheless, if used properly, generating activities may be helpful for many blocked writers who are having trouble getting started. However, some writers may not need generating techniques because they already possess the skills needed to produce solid prose

(Boice, "Psychotherapies"). Usually blocked expert writers, such as academicians, belong in this group.

Management Techniques Various techniques are used to help blocked writers who are already capable of generating ideas. Among the most successful, at least in Boice's view, is contingency management ("Psychotherapies;" "Experimental"). Contingency management is a form of behavioral therapy whereby the writer attempts to complete a writing project through small, sequential steps, often with some sort of reinforcement. For example, a blocked writer might set up and try to follow a schedule of writing for 10 minutes a day, or the writer might try to produce a certain number of pages per day. The time limit or page number goal is increased as the writer meets early goals and gains confidence. One type of reinforcement would be for the writer to agree at the outset to send a sum of money to a hated organization (such as the Ku Klux Klan) if the goals are not met.

One benefit of programs such as contingency management is that they help demystify the writing process, helping writers to see, as Boice notes, "that writing may be subject to ordinary laws of reinforcement" ("Psychotherapies" 199). Such programs also help writers

get into the habit of writing. Boice believes that methods such as this help blocked writers learn what productive writers already know: "writing is best done habitually and in regular amounts, regardless of mood and without awaiting inspiration" (205).

Time management may be a problem that all writers struggle with because sometimes writing can't be rushed (Coe). Lynn Bloom says that a writer's motivation to start a writing project and the possession of the drive to finish may determine in part whether a writer will be able to complete it: "whether a person can easily set goals, priorities and time schedules and stick to them may well determine whether she finishes the work or not" (122). Using time management techniques (similar to contingency management), such as establishing priorities and allocating time for writing according to a schedule, Bloom was able to help one blocked and anxious writer finish her dissertation.

By no means are generating activities and time management and reinforcement techniques the only methods used to cure writer's block, but other than these, blocked writers are faced with more or less scattered advice about how to unblock. For example, various self-help books are available, such as Overcoming Writing Blocks and Writer's Block and How to Use It (Mack and

Skjei; Nelson). Blocked writers may also be advised to try techniques such as self-hypnosis (Stanton). However, writers may need more than self-help advice to unblock. For student writers, the most logical place to turn for such help is the composition classroom.

The teacher's role

In terms of writer's block, teachers have a double responsibility when teaching composition: to help blocked students write fluently and to help other students prevent or avoid writing blocks. The blocked writer may need individual help from the instructor. To help a student overcome writer's block, the teacher needs to spend time analyzing the student's writing process, in addition to studying and diagnosing the student's composition skills (Rose, Writer's Block).

Diagnosis Diagnosis of writer's block can be achieved by individually interviewing students about how they write and how they've written in the past (Rose, Writer's Block). One possible problem with interviewing could be that students may not remember previous composing attempts, or they may try to idealize the writing process, according to how composing has been presented in textbooks or by previous teachers.

The teacher might also try watching the student compose, taking care not to intervene unless necessary. Muriel Harris advocates using thinking-aloud protocols as a tool for analysis, specifically checking for varied, flexible, and productive composing strategies and seeing if there are strategies the student isn't using which might be effective. Only after diagnosing and analyzing the student's behavior can the teacher begin to accurately individualize instruction. Interviewing and working individually with students can also help teachers see if some sort of time management program would help them compose.

Classroom activities Creating a classroom environment conducive to writing and encouraging writers to be flexible may help prevent writer's block. In class, the teacher can emphasize the process of writing, so that students come to understand their own writing processes, and not simply appropriate what the teacher says as absolute rules or received dogma. If students aren't aware of what happens when they write fluently, then it becomes even more difficult for them to understand why they may be blocking. As stated earlier, students may have misconstrued the composing process based on previous instruction, perhaps after witnessing a

writing teacher emphasize mechanical correctness over other concerns. Discussions of writing may also have been oversimplified in composition textbooks (Rose, Writer's Block).

Discussing how professional writers write can also help demystify the composing process; teachers can either use excerpts from interviews or have a writer as a guest speaker. Students might be reassured to know that all writers sometimes struggle, and a professional writer might convince them that writing has its rewards as well.

Students may find writing easier if the writing process is broken into manageable steps, using multiple-draft assignments and collaborative learning activities, such as peer evaluation. Student-centered activities and multiple-draft assignments may help blocked writers discover the types of choices that fluent writers make and may have left to make. Of course, multiple-draft assignments could be potentially frustrating for blocked writers; they may think that if they're having trouble writing one draft they'll never be able to compose several. However, blocked writers can aim for small, manageable goals. A blocked writer may not be able to write a large amount or for long periods at first, but an early goal might be simply to write a small amount, such as a paragraph or so.

To foster writing, students may also serve as mentors for each other. Mentoring activities can include peer editing, generating activities done together, and just talking to each other about writing projects. For example, Boice believes that mentoring may be an important tool for helping blocked writers compose because fluent, successful writers may be able to model good prose and productive writing habits for others ("Psychotherapies").

This mentoring must be carefully monitored by the teacher, so that students don't misinterpret each other. One way to help students understand what other students are doing is to encourage them to talk about how they're judging each other's work, as well as discussing why some choices might have been made over others when composing. Talking about how writers compose can help students understand firsthand the variety of choices writers make and their appropriateness. Another important part of mentoring is helping students learn how to respond to mistakes; teachers can also share some of their writing blunders. The ultimate goal of such activities is to enable students, blocked and nonblocked, to judge their own writing according to context and purpose (Rose, Writer's Block).

Prescriptive pedagogy Unfortunately, teachers sometimes cause or perpetuate writer's block without even realizing it. One benefit of cognitive research about composing is that teachers now know more than ever before about how fluent writers compose. However, because a cognitive model offers so much information and is based on studies of writers during the act of writing, teachers may be tempted to believe that they've found the one way that all writers compose--and try to impose that model on all students. The students may then try to apply what the teacher says about composing out of context--and block.

Clearly, the results of cognitive research can be deceptive, if they are misinterpreted. For instance, Jack Selzer believes that some teachers may try to prescribe to students an "ideal" composing style--without considering differences among writers. When students are given only one model or example of composing, they may take certain information, such as "writers plan before writing," and interpret it absolutely. Selzer, based on his studies of engineers and others in business, thinks that good writers may have several composing styles, each appropriate for a particular writing situation. A writer probably has several means of inventing, organizing, drafting, and revising. A blocked writer needs to

understand how successful writers compose, but he or she may misinterpret a given composing model as representing the only way writers write. Selzer believes that teachers purposefully should expose students to a variety of composing styles and options, rather than imposing a single one. Along the same line, Rose says that to help students understand individual differences, teachers should "spend time discussing and revealing the intricacies, idiosyncracies, and rich complexities of composing" (Writer's Block 88). In addition, teachers should also try to reveal to students procedures that may be counterproductive to successful composing, such as applying a rule like "always grab your audience's attention" without regard to the context of the writing.

Trying to help any writer write fluently and successfully demands that the teacher proceed with caution. Students, even with the best of intentions, sometimes misinterpret information or they simply don't understand what teachers tell them. If teachers aren't careful about monitoring how material is presented and deciding what help is needed, blocked students may suffer the negative consequences long after they leave the composition class.

A broad theoretical framework

In order to fully understand why a writer may be blocking, teachers need a broad theoretical framework, one which includes not just information about cognition but also information about how a writer may be influenced by the social aspect of writing and his or her emotions. As discussed earlier, writer's block doesn't occur for purely cognitive reasons. One potential criticism of cognitive research is that it has ignored how a writer's emotions and feelings may affect writing (McLeod; Brand). Therefore, individual differences in composing may be better understood in relation to how a writer's cognitive processes and emotions interact. Rose agrees that "emotion cannot always be neatly stripped away from the way we deal with information" ("Complexity" 234). For example, a writer's reliance on rigid planning strategies may be related to feelings of inadequacy about writing ability.

Cognitivists also sometimes seem to separate the study of a writer's mental processes from the social aspect of writing, or how the writer might be influenced by elements of the writer's relationship to the world. As Lester Faigley notes, a strictly cognitive view may "overlook differences in language use among students of different social classes, genders, and ethnic

backgrounds" (534). Bartholomae argues that a writer can't be isolated from the social context in which he or she is being asked to compose. The social context of each writing task carries with it specific constraints of which the writer may or may not be aware. Cognitive aspects of writing, such as which rules or plans writers do or do not adhere to, may be in part determined and influenced by social and environmental factors (Rose, "Complexity"). For example, how a writer represents the audience for a particular task (regarding what information to include and so forth) may be based in part on his or her experience with past audiences.

Future research

Because writer's block is such a complex problem, it remains ripe for more in-depth investigation. Some of the research that has been done offers much insight into how blocked writers attempt to use cognitive processes while writing. Writing apprehension and the social context of the writing task have been shown to be possible influences on writer's block as well. However, to fully understand writer's block, still more information is needed, especially in the areas of composing styles, a writer's personality, and the relationship of expert and novice writers to blocking.

Composing styles A successful and fluent writer may choose a composing style according to each writing situation and his or her goals. Selzer has discovered that business and technical writers compose multiple drafts of some reports, while other reports are completed in one draft; some reports may be written over several months, while others of similar length are composed in a matter of days; and some reports are composed almost entirely from scratch, while others are mostly revisions of previous documents.

Rose and Flower and Hayes believe that differences in composing styles exist among writers (Writer's Block; "Identifying"). For example, one writer might compose using a more analytic style, proceeding cautiously and focusing on particulars of the writing task. Another writer might be much more easily caught up in the play of words. But what Selzer is suggesting is that each writer might use several different styles. Common sense tells one that this is true--composing a letter to a friend is likely to be done in a much different manner than is drafting a prospectus for an upcoming project.

Both sets of assumptions about composing styles need to be investigated in light of writer's block. A writer's predominant style of composing could directly influence the choice of planning strategies adopted, the

rules accepted or rejected and the goals selected. It is also possible that the writer's ability to select the appropriate style for a writing task could determine in part whether or not that person will compose fluently.

Blocking related to personality Perhaps writers' preferred composing styles are related to their personality types. Jensen and DiTiberio argue that a writer's personality may determine how he or she proceeds when writing. For example, a writer may block when asked to complete a writing task that is not structured according to his or her personality type.

Jensen and DiTiberio have used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to identify personality types but warn that the test can be misused if teachers or researchers assign negative connotations to certain types. Nonetheless, their research indicates that proper use of the MBTI can yield more information about how personality types relate to writing.

Of particular interest to a study of writer's block would be a detailed examination of how a teacher's personality type relates to students of differing personality types. Teachers may offer assignments that are appropriate to how they like to write, instead of adapting assignments to a student's particular needs.

If the student's needs aren't met, the chances of blocking are increased. For example, an instructor who is primarily an intuitive type, preferring general instructions that can be approached in a unique way, might be teaching a sensing type student, who prefers more detailed and concrete plans. The teacher could unknowingly present a broad and unstructured assignment more appropriate to his or her personality type--while the student would need a more precise set of instructions. It's also possible that teachers' personality types might affect how they evaluate students' writing (Jensen and DiTiberio). This in turn could relate to how students perceive their writing abilities and possibly influence writing apprehension or blocking.

All of the above is speculative. As Jensen and DiTiberio admit, more concrete data are needed overall about how personality types relate to writing.

The relationship of blocking to writing skill

Cognitive research has shown that blocked writers share some of the same characteristics as novice writers, such as being less adept at developing workable global plans. However, blocking isn't specific to a particular skill level; writers often block who may be considered experts

due to their experience, such as professors and graduate students.

I believe two questions regarding the relationship of expert/novice writers and blocking are relevant. First, are certain types of blocking particular to each group? In other words, do expert writers block in manner and degree differently from novice writers? It is possible that experts and novices block in ways unique to their skill and experience levels and thus would need different strategies for overcoming writing blocks. Secondly, if expert writers have composed successfully in the past, why are they blocking now? Even though they may make some of the same choices as novice writers when composing, expert writers have been able to compose fluently before. One would assume that because of how they compose, expert writers would have blocked at earlier skill levels and thus never have been able to reach the "expert" status, yet this isn't true. Perhaps the two questions are closely related.

In general, studies in each of these areas and others would offer a more comprehensive understanding of writer's block than what is available at this time. If teachers had more insight into the reasons for blocking and the ways in which writers block, they could be better prepared to help blocked students.

Finally, there is danger in relying on strategies or tips to cure writer's block without a careful consideration of their appropriateness and actual effectiveness. For instance, while teaching freshman composition I often simply suggested that blocked students freewrite to help get started--not realizing they might have needed more help in time management, they might have become more confused by the disorder freewriting produces, or they might not have understood the purpose of the activity in the first place.

However, even with the possibility that they will overgeneralize about a given strategy's effectiveness or appropriateness, teachers still need more testable and workable procedures for helping blocked students. As stated earlier, a general hodgepodge of advice now exists on how to help a blocked student. In many cases, this advice may not be verified by results, and the context for which it is appropriate may not be specified either. Many teachers aren't specifically trained to counsel students suffering from writer's block--and sometimes they need more to rely on than common sense. Just as students need to know that there are different options in composing, teachers need to know more about writer's block in general and what kinds of things can be done to help a blocked student write fluently.

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APPENDIX. COMPARISON OF THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EXPERT/NOVICE WRITERS AND BLOCKED/NONBLOCKED WRITERS

	Experts	Novices	Blockers	Nonblockers
knowledge of writing process	self-aware, guide personal creative process	may view composing as inspired, aren't aware of ability to change writing process	similar to novices, may have other misconceptions as well	similar to experts
rhetorical problem	skilled at developing unique representation of rhet. problem if needed	tend to work with original, static representation or only what has worked in the past	similar to novices, not adept at creating new representations if needed	similar to experts
audience	create/refine goals for audience	tend to get caught up in local concerns, may disregard needs of audience	removed from corrective feedback, also may focus on local concerns instead of readers' needs	test their goals/plans according to perceived needs of audience
goals/ plans	adept at creating high, low and middle-range goals, operational plans	not skilled at creating middle-range goals, tend to work only with abstract goals/plans or lower-level concerns	similar to novices, may overdepend on one goal, plan or strategy at expense of progress, plan incrementally	similar to experts, use flexible goals and plans modified to writing task
organizing/ rules	often generate/write first, then organize, apply flexible rules	overly concerned early in process with organization, structure, rules may be flexible or inflexible	may quickly apply algorithmic type rules to writing, regardless of appropriateness	similar to experts, use functional heuristic-type rules
revising/ editing	reevaluate draft as a whole, use revision as a discovery process, refine writing in later drafts	concentrate on rewording, lexical changes for made for static image of reader, may edit too soon	often edit prematurely, at expense of writing progress	able to avoid editing too soon